

Acts

Summary - The truth is marching on

Well, here we are at the end of **Acts 28** and it can seem a bit disappointing, like watching a movie with all kinds of loose ends that need tying up and plots that need concluding, and suddenly the screen goes black and up pops “The End.” It can’t be, surely; how frustrating. But now we see Luke doing exactly the same thing in Acts, because Paul has just got to Rome, and the chance at last to take the gospel to the very centre of the most powerful empire on the planet. But just when we’re on the verge of seeing what will likely be many more amazing doors opening to Paul, “The End” pops up on screen in verse 31, and we hear no more of Paul or his exploits in Luke’s journal.

So why did Luke end there, and so abruptly? But, one may ask, what else needed to be said? Because in **verse 31** we have a **great summary** of all that Paul had been doing up to this point in the book of Acts - and in this same verse he’s still at it full bore and all guns blazing, even when he’s under house arrest. Despite his limitations he’s still **“boldly and without hindrance preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Which is amazing in itself, because this is Rome, ruled at the time by the brutish Emperor Nero. But right under Nero’s nose Paul was talking openly and boldly about another empire, a competing kingdom, ruled by an even more powerful Lord called Jesus, whose followers claimed he’d been resurrected from the dead. This was inflammatory stuff, but Paul was able to teach **“without hindrance”** (verse 31).

That’s amazing, because Paul was under constant surveillance by Nero’s very own Praetorian Guard, as well as being guarded personally by Roman soldiers day and night (verse 16), any one of whom could have reported what he was saying. But for “two years,” while waiting for his case to be heard in Caesar’s court, Paul was able to invite anyone over, chat freely with them in the house and garden, and send his personally written letters to the churches through those who were visiting him. So Paul himself was restricted and hindered in his movements, yes, but the gospel message wasn’t hindered, a point that Luke leaves hanging in our ears in his conclusion.

Here in a little house, then, in the heart of the most powerful empire in the world, the Lordship and teachings of Jesus were being taught and heard.

And that to Luke was a great place to end his journal, because if the gospel could continue to go out in circumstances like these, then what was to stop it going out in whatever the future held too? Luke could also see a pattern emerging as he wrote his journal, because again and again, no matter what the circumstances, **“the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power,”** **Acts 19:20** (plus Acts 5:14, 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, and 16:5). Even in totally pagan cities like Ephesus the Holy Spirit had opened up opportunities for the gospel to “open people’s eyes, turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). And thousands had responded too.

Imagine, then, being Luke recording all this, and witnessing the growth of the church from “about a hundred and twenty” in Acts 1:15, to several thousands in Acts 2:41, to tens of thousands as the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, just as Jesus promised in Acts 1:8 - and now here it was at “the ends of the earth” in Rome, the centre of the world. No wonder Luke ended on such a high note, because it was clear by now that **this pattern would continue into the future as well.**

This is what Jesus had promised the gift of the Holy Spirit for, though, to get that message about himself and the kingdom of God boldly preached and without hindrance to both Jews and Gentiles far and wide, because that’s what they needed to hear more than anything else in their lives. With that in mind, then, what exactly IS the message of Jesus and the kingdom of God?

Fortunately, Luke records that too, eight verses earlier in **Acts 28:20**. Paul has managed to get all the Jewish leaders in Rome over to his place so he can explain why he, as a Jew, is in Rome as a prisoner, and he tells them, **“It’s because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”**

But how does “the hope of Israel” tie in with boldly preaching Jesus and the kingdom of God? Well, Luke knew the answer to that, because he’d already recorded it in his journal back in **Acts 3** when Peter set about his explanation for a cripple being totally healed on simply the mention of Jesus’ name (verse 6). “Men of Israel,” Peter began in **verse 12**, and then he zoomed right in on the hope of all Israel, that God would one day fulfill all that he’d predicted through their (Old Testament) prophets (verses 18, 21 and 24).

These “Men of Israel,” however, had killed the One through whom God was fulfilling those prophecies (verses 13-15) - **“BUT God raised him from the dead,”** **verse 15**, so that through him God would “restore everything as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” - and exactly as Moses had predicted too, **verses 21-22**. So this was the central message of Scripture.

It was also the sole source of hope for humanity, the great covenant God had made with Abraham, that “Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed,” **verse 25**. And here in the flesh WAS that offspring of Abraham - in the person of Jesus whose suffering, also predicted by the prophets (verse 18), would snuff out their Israelite sins, and in his resurrected state he’d “bless” them “by turning each of you from your wicked ways,” **verse 26**.

And there you have a summary of the hope of Israel, that through their promised Messiah the “times of refreshing” (verse 19) and the restoration of all things (verse 21) would begin, starting with Israel and the Jews (verse 26), but spreading out to “all peoples on earth” too. The Jews of Jesus’ day, however, had missed connecting that hope with **Jesus**, so Jesus had assigned his apostles to go out and make that connection for people, backed by the power of the Holy Spirit to make that connection **real**.

And the book of Acts is the proof that it happened. Thousands of Jews got the message loud and clear on Pentecost, that the crucified Jesus was “both Lord and Christ,” **Acts 2:36**. Not only was he the promised Christ Messiah; he was also the promised “Lord,” who, just as the prophets predicted, would take over the rulership of the world. The person they’d known as the human Jesus, therefore, was now the resurrected living Lord of everything.

No wonder, then, that Luke focused on this in his last words in Acts, because it was the understanding of **the resurrected Jesus as Lord of everything** that not only summarized the hope of Israel, it was also the hope of all humanity. Because what we humans are in need of more than anything is a great and powerful Lord establishing a new kingdom on this earth that turns people from their wicked ways and deals with evil once and for all.

And it was so important for people to know this, that the Holy Spirit made sure it was boldly preached and without hindrance in Acts, backed up with “signs and wonders” too (Acts 14:3). Because life otherwise was hopeless. Look at the awful situations people were in all through Acts, starting with the cripple in Acts 3, to “crowds bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits” in Acts 5:16, to an entire nation being captivated by sorcery (Acts 8), to Elymas being so full of “deceit and trickery” he’d become “the enemy of everything that is right” (Acts 13:10), to the jealousy of the Jews (17:5), to Felix not wanting to hear about “righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (24:25), to the empty, satanic dependence on useless gods that Paul encountered in city after city. Something had to be done about it, but **here that something was happening**, in Paul boldly telling people there was a new Lord in town - appointed by God himself - to clean up the mess (Acts 17:31).

By Acts 28:31, then, Luke clearly knew this was how things would continue in the future too. And here WE are now **IN that future**, with the Holy Spirit still on the job making sure that “the hope of Israel” - the promised Messiah Lord establishing his kingdom on earth to deal with evil - is being boldly preached and without hindrance, despite the ignorance, deception and resistance so prevalent today as well.

But HOW is that being done today? Well, we know from Luke’s journal that Jesus deals with evil on two levels. First, he **confronts the evil influences of the culture**, whether it’s the mesmerizing sorcery of Simon and Elymas, or whole cities obsessed with gods and goddesses like Athens and Ephesus, or corrupt religious and political leaders like king Herod (12:21-23) and the Jewish chief priests and elders (23:12-15). All those conditions - sorcery, obsession with gods, and corrupt leadership - exist today too, our hope being that Jesus will deal with them, because only he can.

The second level of evil that Jesus is dealing with is **in ourselves**, as Luke recorded Peter saying in Acts 3:26, that God raised up Jesus “to bless you by turning **each of you** from **your** wicked ways.” Luke also recorded Paul telling the Athenians in Acts 17:30-31, that God “commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.” And that’s our hope too, isn’t it, that Jesus is also **putting us all to rights personally**, because (again) only he can.

And as proof that Jesus was actively doing this, Luke recorded thousands of lifetime pagans in Ephesus experiencing both points. First of all, they rejected the evil influences of their culture and “held the name of the Lord Jesus in high honour,” **Acts 19:17**. And, secondly, they “openly confessed their evil deeds” personally too, **verse 18**. Talk about “signs and wonders” by the Holy Spirit.

But does the Spirit do the same kind of wonders **today**? Because that’s our hope, right? - it’s in the Spirit **continuing** what he did through Paul, turning people entrenched in their culture to holding Jesus in high honour as their Lord, and openly confessing where they’ve been wrong. So, do we know of anyone **today** who’s actually done that? Well, if Luke was here, he’d likely say to us, “Go look in the mirror, chum, because YOU did it - you turned from the gods of the culture to Jesus and admitted how wrong you’d been, right?”

We are our own proof, then, that the Holy Spirit is still doing signs and wonders, and that Acts 28:31 is also a prediction of what would continue to happen through the centuries. Luke left us hanging, yes, but only because he knew from experience that the truth would keep marching on, and “without hindrance,” just as it had all through the book of Acts.